THE IMP

NO. 1

THE FALLEN WORLD
of DANIEL CLOWES

THE IMP

"POTRZEBIE IS THE MOTHER OF INVENTION"

THE IMP is the point where the devil, the jester, and the child all three meet—and where more pointedly than in the comic book? Comic books were intended for kids, meant to be comic, and despite many well-meaning attempts at homogenization, are still clearly the work of the devil. Witness our first imp, Dan Clowes, and his fascination with satanism, sadism, sexism, racism, and mass murder. Now *this* is the kind of artist The Imp likes—it takes comix seriously. That's the mission of The Imp...seriously.

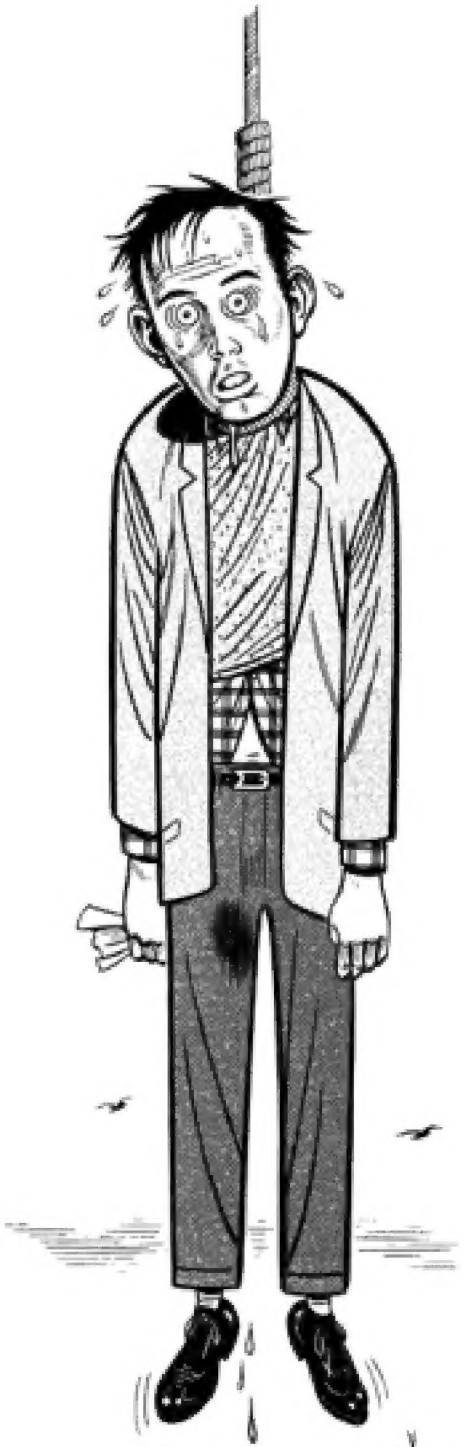
The Editor Speaks.

Comix, comics, whatever. The fact that I don't know anything about comics can only help me to take them seriously. We'll discuss Jack Chick, not Jack Kirby. Even as a kid I knew Jack Kirby was a blockhead. Horror, war, *Mad,* and *Plop!*—that's where my wee heart lay.

I admit that to be serious about comix is to risk ruining them, like a good joke, by explaining them to death. For example, I say that *potrzebie* is the mother of invention because I know now that it's literally true: *potrzebie* is Polish for "necessity." But to me at age seven *potrzebie* meant nothing—or anything. It was pure humor, arbitrary to the point of inanity and therefore hilarity. The gag-meister of *Mad,* Harvey Kurtzman, gleefully used the unknowable ejaculation to pop the bubble of American childhoods' sanity, sure that we would keep the word, make it our own, make it the shibboleth I now invoke. Yuh hadda *be* there, man.

I invoke the password aware, as was the immigrant Kurtzman, that I laughed out of ignorance. Ignorance is a big part of humor—that's the devil of it. Laughing at a Pole for pronouncing his need isn't too far from laughing at Chinese for their names, or at anybody for just being different. Ethnicity is an undeniable part of cartooning—check American caricatures from long before that little yellow mick all the way up to today's evil arabs, brought to you by Disney—and it's tricky ground, ground our first imp has recently groped his way across. Spending time with this foole's work has been one of the great pleasures of my life. Ladies and gentlemen, the fallen world of Daniel Clowes.

THE IMP, number 1, was published eventually by Daniel K. Raeburn, 1454 W. Summerdale 2C, Chicago, IL 60640, and is © 1997 by Daniel K. Raeburn. Artwork on every page but this is © Daniel G. Clowes. All artwork used by permission. Thanks a ton, Dan'l. Thanks also to Fantagraphics Books and Monte Beauchamp of *Blab!* for permission to reprint words and pictures from their fine publications. Thanks to Brian for use of the Blank Expression studio, my family and friends for support, and most of all to Tara. As Muddy siz, "You *move* me, dollin'."



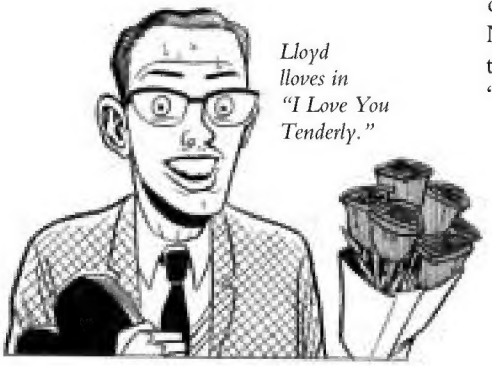
DANIEL CLOWES is my kind of hopeless romantic. Like me, he's a cynic. He doesn't moon, he's mean. He *hates*: that's why he's hopeless. Daniel Clowes' hopelessness would have probably overwhelmed him by now but for his own, invented defense against it: his romanticism. This iota of sweetness, his soft spot, is what saves Clowes from himself and his otherwise all-consuming despair. But the kernel of romanticism, like faith, was more of an idea than a reality at its conception. That's how Clowes' comic book, *Eightball,* began: as a cruel world. I instantly fell in love with it.

Eightball was so funny, so unfair, so wrong that it was right. It made me *glad* that the world was fucked up. Every single cretin meant more grist for the mill of Clowes' pen; in this way I learned to be grateful for the world in all its essential ugliness. I laughed at stupidity, then welcomed it. A pretty backward psychology, I admit, but as Frederick Exley wrote, hate can redeem as well as love. Most people don't agree with this negative thinking: throughout his career Clowes has been criticized for being misanthropic and nihilistic. Of course he was—that's why I loved him. But my excuse for *liking* him was my taking to heart every hint of his inner humanitarian, promising the grub would one day fly from its chrysalis. The odd thing is that, as he's actually begun this emergence, Dan Clowes is no longer our funniest cartoonist—he's our most profound cartoonist. The joke's not funny anymore, but it's on Dan, and Dan is telling it.

"WHEN I LIVED in Chicago I was not happy," Clowes calmly explains to me at his house in Berkeley. "I was much more hard at that point. Setting up a tripod

by the Chicago River and machine-gunning everybody would have made me happy. I had fantasies like that. So when I moved here I started to try to come to grips with that. That's the inner conflict in my work." Shy Dan stirs his tea and addresses the swirl. "I'm trying to find some sympathy for the mass of humanity. I have great sympathy for the specifics of humanity, for the individuals in their struggles. But when I see humanity as a group it always repels me. I'm repulsed." Vexation creeps into his otherwise even voice: "Would I create all these characters and do this comic and do all this work if I really didn't care?" Although Clowes' question is directed rhetorically at his critics, I feel that it's still *his* question, and it hangs in the air as though it were in one of his own word balloons.

The real-life Dan Clowes' silvering hair accentuates his surprisingly quiet, perspicacious manner. His voice is kind, softened by experience and understanding. This gentle certainty, in combination with his button-down, sweater-and-blazer attire, makes Dan Clowes appear to be nothing so much as a tall, thin man of the cloth. A dark, handsome priest. It's an odd similarity which deepens when midway through our conversation he confesses his attraction for pictures of women in full bondage gear. Drops of sweat leak from his forehead as he patiently explains that his attraction is a purely visual, aesthetic one, and that he would never, ever actually use such implements. . .



Lloyd lloves in "I Love You Tenderly."

Dan's alter ego, Lloyd Llewellyn, fulminates in "I Hate You Deeply."

Dan Clowes seems to be made of such contradictions, of opposites and their attractions. He works for *The New Yorker* and for *Hustler.* If not perverted, he's certainly perverse—animated by what Poe called "the imp of the perverse," the nagging tug of the irrational or intransigent. When I inform Clowes that I've gladly never been to Los Angeles, he urges me: "You've gotta go. Got to. It's the monoculture." One hour later he cries, "When I go to southern California I get so depressed. I can imagine how the whole world could be like that. I'm not sure life would be worth living." Then why go there? Does he have to position himself at the limit of our westward expansion, at the cerebral cortex of the American consciousness, in order to change its destructive thought patterns? No—nothing that grand. "I don't know that that I'm fighting it," Clowes admits, "but that's where I get my inspiration. I feel like I could actually live in LA and do good artwork—but I'd be really miserable." Like the two hands of Robert Mitchum's preacher in *Night of the Hunter,* it's an old battle between LOVE and HATE, and no telling which is which and who's a-winnin'.

If the impending californication of the world inspires Clowes, it's because strip-malling is only part of an even larger force: the future. "The whole idea of the future is just a constant nightmare to me," Clowes says. "It's really the most horrifying thing." One can either run from this future or face it; right now, Dan Clowes is doing both. With one foot he's in flight, fleeing from the future into an imaginary past. This is nothing new;

he's still as nostalgic as he ever was, even during his obsessions with JFK-era zip-a-tone iconography. But with his other foot Clowes is making a stand. He's trying to construct some kind of meaning in a country where nothing has meaning, where nothing is sacred except the free market, the freeway, and the headlong pursuit of happiness. Is life worth living when there's nothing but yammering airwaves and strip malls? I wonder if it is even possible to be original in a hyper-accelerated Culture-culture which simultaneously inspires and devours newness, devours even its own past. "That's what *Ghost World* is about, really," Clowes says. To make something out of nothing; that is the question, and essentially what Clowes' latest serialized comix and first feature film, *Ghost World,* is trying to do.

Clowes has embodied his hopes for the future in the form of eighteen-year-old Enid Coleslaw and her closest friend, Rebecca Doppelmeyer: the heroines of *Ghost World.* Born four years ago as a character sketch in the pages of *Eightball,* Enid and Becky walk and talk just like real teenage girls: smart, bratty, funny, cruel, romantic. They're normal misfits. Enid reads books, Becky changes the channels; Enid spies on satanists, Becky stares after every other guy she sees. Enid might go to college next year; Becky will not—that's the wedge between them in the comix. "I wanted to create two likeable characters," Clowes says. "Characters that I liked, anyway. That was my sole intention." Of course, according to the inexorable law of the Clowesian universe, irony happens: "I get so many letters saying, 'You obviously hate these characters. They're so awful. It's great that you're parodying the modern teenager.'" But even though these fans got Clowes' intentions wrong, they're still right, in a way. If they think the girls are awful it's because Clowes is awful, as he himself admits: "Basically the girls have all of my opinions," he says."I can get away with it because it's two teenage girls. If I had some cranky old man saying the same stuff it would just seem awful. He'd be a horrible monster."

As the title of *Ghost World* suggests, the girls live in a limbo between childhood and adulthood, between the past and the future. It's a concrete world defined literally by commerce. Each episode to date revolves around places of business: diners, a supermarket, a sex shop, record stores. It's the late–twentieth-century American quest for definition: you are what you buy. And what's for sale? Crap. Lame, tacky crap. Becky and Enid wallow in crap, learn to live with crap —even love it—and yet they're not really buying it. They instantly reject anything slick or advertised. Hipness is unhip. The girls of *Ghost World* are today's teen heathens: they don't believe in MTV. In the long tradition of all alienated teenagers, they hate phoniness—but in their ultra-ironic sensibility completely inept phoniness is good because it is *transparent*. The worst recreation of a 1950s diner is therefore the best. The lamest stand-up comedian is therefore the most revered. Becky and Enid can see right through to the comedy's pathetic, human core, and in that sense they experience something genuine.

That's what they crave. They're lonely, and they want contact, fellow conspirators. For this reason the story is ultimately Enid's story. She's driven impishly to initiate contact with the other oddballs who inhabit their city. Besides spying on the neighborhood satanists, Enid is chasing Bob Skeetes, the psychic astrologer who looks like a piece of cosmic driftwood; teasing Josh, the loner and only boy she likes; and cruelly using an assumed personality to answer a lonely-hearts classified ad. It's obvious that Enid hates everything only because she truly wants something and hasn't yet found it. The paradox of her insecurity is that she primarily rejects people because she is so afraid of *their* rejection.

She's obviously a lot like her creator, which puts her creator in a bit of a spot. Despite all the ego obsessions of *Eightball,* Clowes says that he's not comfortable with the creating or reading of his comix in a highly personal manner. When a comix reviewer criticized him for keeping an "icy distance" between himself and his characters, between himself and his readers, Clowes thought: "That's *great.* I couldn't ask for more." He emblazoned the critic's phrase across the masthead of his very next issue. Given this, doesn't Dan's personal affection for Becky and Enid make

At the local grocery store, Becky Doppelmeyer discovers what satan-worshippers eat for every meal.

Ghost World a little too close for comfort? After all, Clowes has already inserted his rumpled, eager self into the story as a cartoonist with one eye for teenage Enid—who, it must be said, bears a remarkable resemblance to the real-life Mrs. Clowes. Is Dan worried his sympathy will cloud his artistry? "I'm almost too close to that problem to answer," he replies. "The interest to me lies in the conflict between entering their world, becoming very close to them, and then viewing them at a distance. You have to be sitting in the room with them and also be the fly on the wall looking down at them." Fortunately, in the story Enid dismisses her comic father and potential Humbert Humbert: "He was like this old *perv,*" she laments. Good eye.

Not only is Clowes juggling his personal and his omniscient perspectives, he's juggling them in the comix and in the film, simultaneously. He's working with *Crumb* director and American music documentarian Terry Zwigoff. On the first day of 1997 he says,

"We're about two-thirds done with the script." Of writing the comix version of *Ghost World* and the film version of *Ghost World* at the same time: "It's weird. They're different. They're very different because the characters are the same but *not* the same. They're a shade off. It's very confusing. I can't remember if a line of dialogue appeared in the comic or in the movie."

Clowes isn't giving any scoops regarding the script, at least partially because, as he claims, he doesn't really know what he's doing. But he drops a few hints: mainly, it's even more of a black comedy. "We made it more Hollywood-friendly," he says. I listen, not without fear. "Adding some other characters so there's a beginning, a middle, and an end. It's not just a random, picaresque kinda thing where they're running around having all kinds of adventures." Enid's decision about college is no longer the wedge between the girls. "But it has a substitute for that, which has the same dramatic function that has."

And the plot is...? "I don't know. We don't really know what we're doing, so I think that's a benefit. We're on page seventy-four and I don't think we've done that yet." He laughs. "We'll get around to it." I get the idea: never talk about a work in progress. Next question.

I ask the man who has already drawn the fictional Hollywood ruination of his comix if he has creative control of *Ghost*

World. Unfortunately not, Clowes says, because he and Zwigoff are dealing with what they call a "real" studio. He adds, "But we've got as good as deal as you can get with a 'real' studio." His discussion picks up speed; from this, I get the impression that he and Zwigoff have thought through this from every angle. "They can't make it unless we agree. They can suggest changes, and we can agree to make them, but if we don't agree, then we just say, 'Thank you very much,' and walk. So, they can't make it with another director unless we actually get started filming the script and they fire Terry and hire another director." Uh, right. They can't fire the director unless they fire the director. "But nobody wants to do that," Clowes says confidently. "They really want Terry Zwigoff." That I can understand, and Clowes is right to trust Zwigoff—but what about the studio? What do they care about your script? "They don't want me. They have no idea who I am. They're all excited because they think, Oh, it's a *comic*. Comics are *hip*. But they've never looked at my comics." *They* in this case are Jersey Pictures, Danny DeVito's film company, the company behind *Pulp Fiction* and *Get Shorty*. Hence the *hip*.

Funding is being provided by Universal Pictures. "The studio of Boris Karloff," Dan smiles with reverence—a reverence made touching, not false, by its germ of irony. That's what this is really all about: we're dorks. Two shy guys who still like comix and monsters. *It's alive...! Gasp! (choke!)*

Clowes isn't too worried about his comix being mangled by Hollywood nincompoops, mainly because it's a chance for him to do something that any astute observer of his comix, especially *Like a Velvet Glove Cast in Iron,* can see he's always wanted to do: make a movie. "This movie is more of a technical exercise for me than a way to really express myself," he says. "I'm *so* uncomfortable and unfamiliar with what I'm doing that

if I could just write a script that actually works in this weird, algebraic way that it has to work, I'd be happy." The technician in him awakened, Clowes grows nearly animated, awed: "It's really like solving a huge trigonometry project. This affects this, and if you change this it affects that, and so on and so on. It's a huge equation. A huge, unwieldy set of variables."

THE SAME goes for trying to figure all of Dan's variables. It's as though the real Dan Clowes were surrounded by the funhouse mirrors of his life, his work, and his opinions, the reflections of each facet so distorted and infinite in conjunction with the others that ultimately they're all indistinguishable. There are hundreds of Dan Cloweses and many of them, if not most, are laughing at you. Meeting Dan and talking to him confused me even more because, like the best artists, Clowes doesn't know why certain subjects keep coming up. You can't explain a joke, and Clowes often can't explain his work. "I'm so close to that question I can hardly even comment," he says, or, "I dunno." He says, "I dunno," to me a *lot*. Like most smart people, Dan Clowes is quite aware of just how little he really does know—and his universe seems to revolve around these voids.

FOR YEARS Dan has rejected religions again and again. And again. And again. The self-described Christian-hater and avowed atheist keeps coming back. "I'm not exactly sure why, either," he murmurs. "For someone who was raised with no religion and with no pressure to believe in any kind of religion." His murmur disappears into a silent, private black hole of sorts whose gravity has drawn much of his thinking and feeling and holds them tightly. He offers the obvious: "The idea of a belief that is larger than our personal interactions on a day-to-day basis is interesting to me," he says. "I'm not sure I have a fix on that." I prod him: what about your namesake, a seer of apocalypse? He describes being taken as a child by his grandparents to a performance of the Book of Daniel by divinity students at Rockefeller Chapel in Chicago. The prophet's vision of the multiheaded, apocalyptic monster scared young Daniel so badly that he vomited.

In "Why I Hate Christians," Clowes' devil's advocate defends Christianity.

I try to unwind Clowes with the most obvious deity in his work: Old Scratch. "Usually the people who become Satanists have a real issue with the Christian religion," he says. "It's the flip side of the coin."

Before I can half-jokingly ask him to clarify whether or not he's describing himself, he continues: "They were usually brought up in really oppressive

THIS ONE FORETELLS THE COMING TRIBULATION IN WHICH EVERY MAN AND WOMAN WILL BE IMPRINTED WITH A COMPUTER UPC CODE ON THEIR FOREHEAD AND THE SUPERCHURCH, RUN BY THE POPE (WHO IS THE ANTICHRIST,) WILL FORCE THE USA (WHICH WILL AT THIS POINT BE A CASHLESS SOCIETY) INTO A BLOODY WAR WITH...

From "Devil Doll," Clowes' parody of Jack T. Chick's religious tracts.

Christian homes, and they're trying to play that out. To me, they're equally remote, and dull, and wrong-headed. Are they really any different than Christians who, perhaps, also have beliefs that would lead them to do us harm?" Good point: more human lives have been taken in the name of God than have been taken in the name of Satan. "It's always occurred to me," he concludes,"that if you're going to believe that much, why not just go the whole route and become a Christian? If you actually do believe in one you should believe in the other." To embellish Lloyd Llewellyn's defense of the proposition that haters make the best lovers: it's a yin-yang kinda thing-thang.

Perhaps the attraction to religion is a result of its very conspicuous absence in childhood. To a child like Daniel of urban Marxists, religion is the forbidden fruit. "I have a bunch of friends who were raised just like me," Clowes says, "who became born-again Christians. They hated that they were raised their whole lives with geometric possibilities going off in every direction. All of a sudden it was too much: 'What do I *do*?' They became very narrow."

Daniel speaks from experience. At one point the circumstances of his life narrowed such that he himself saw the light. The light was cast, appropriately enough, from the flames of the hellfire and brimstone comix booklets of Jack T. Chick. Dan recalls "a really bad weekend" when he was in art school: his Brooklyn apartment had no gas and no electricity—in the winter. "For some reason," he begins, "I went into a Christian bookstore. They had a spinner rack with all the Jack Chick comics for eight cents each. So I bought sixty of them, five dollars worth, a stack which is still the core of my collection." When he arrived back at his dark apartment, Clowes bundled for warmth and read all sixty

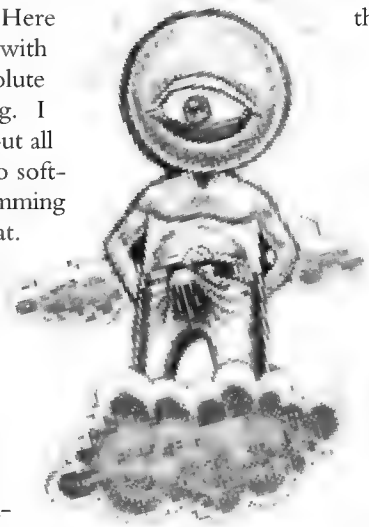
PLEASE JESUS... I TURN MY LIFE OVER TO YOU ... WASH AWAY MY SINS WITH YOUR BLOOD & SOBE I ADMIT THAT I'M A SINNER AND WITHOUT YOU I AM WORTHLESS!

Devil Doll sees the light.

booklets in a row, by flashlight. "It was too much for me," he stresses. "I was really convinced that I was fucked. I thought, Okay: he's *proven* his point. I'd never been absolutely convinced by a comic book before in my life, but I was

sure that he was right and that I'd been crazy all along. It was so convincing. I was in the right frame of mind, and to read that many in a row, this overwhelming tidal wave of Christianity coming at you—it's an amazing experience. Here was this comic dealing with life and death. The absolute most important thing. I mean, he was pulling out all the stops, there was no soft-pedaling, he was just ramming it down your throat. Never before had I been affected like that by comics."

"Of course," Dan adds, "a couple of hours later I thought: 'What am I *thinking*?'"

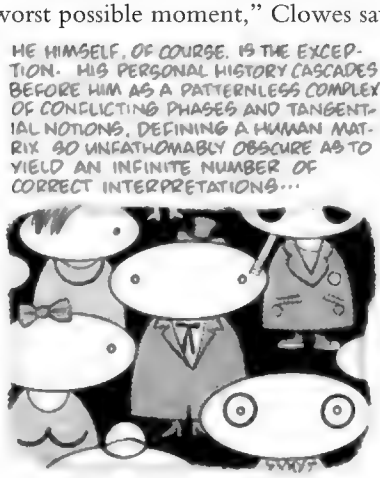


Gawd.

If Clowes rejects religious organizations, he's just begun to explore the religious questions he feels must be asked: "While I don't accept organized religion," Clowes says, "I still think it deals with questions that have to be dealt with. I think that's sort of what I'm looking for in my comics." In the first panel of Clowes' recent story, "Gynecology," the voice of the omniscient narrator asks the reader: *Do you believe in God?*

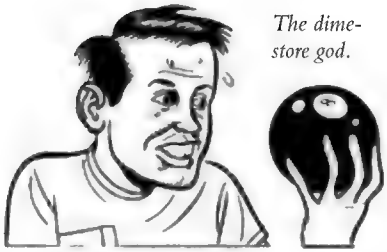
With this question Clowes is pointing out that we do have to believe in a creator in order to experience a story. We have to suspend disbelief, have faith in the author-ity, to enter His invented world. "I am this dime-store god creating this stuff," Clowes explains. "To me, these characters are real and the *readers* are imaginary, rather than the other way around. In the mind of the creator, these situations are reversed." Like a dime-store Zeus asserting his authority, Clowes throws a bolt of lightning in the first panel. The lightning, says Clowes, is meant to evoke the sense of a frozen moment: "When the world is illuminated," he says, "and you all of a sudden see everything with perfect clarity for one second." This beginning visual epiphany echoes at the climax of the story, when our half-a-man "hero," the artist named only Epps, has a vision in his bathtub. Epps' epiphany? Humans are all animals, of no more consequence than ants—but he's the exception, of course. *His* life has meaning. That meaning, however, is whatever you make of it. Each and every contrary interpretation is equally valid. Meaning in such abundance that it's finally, perhaps, all meaningless.

"That's my view of the world at the worst possible moment," Clowes says.


HE HIMSELF, OF COURSE, IS THE EXCEPTION. HIS PERSONAL HISTORY CASCADES BEFORE HIM AS A PATTERNLESS COMPLEX OF CONFLICTING PHASES AND TANGENTIAL NOTIONS, DEFINING A HUMAN MATRIX SO UNFATHOMABLY OBSCURE AS TO YIELD AN INFINITE NUMBER OF CORRECT INTERPRETATIONS...

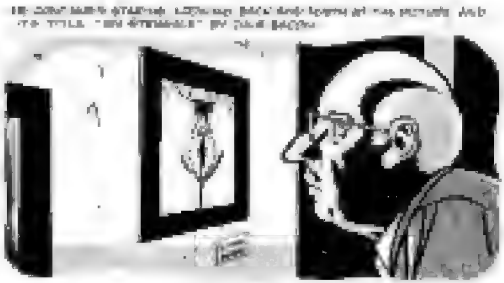
In his vision Epps sees the Dr. Disguise dolls he collected as a child.

"That's a lot of what this story was about: my worst-case thoughts. When I get as depressed as I can get, these are the thoughts that cross my mind." We last see Epps on the rebound, described as a pinball in a machine. Life, like the invented comic, is mechanical. But, to paraphrase Clowes himself, there's an invisible membrane of truth we fathom that connects these random and arbitrary machinations. A ghost in the machine: our single interpretation. It may be fuzzy, may be only one of many interpretations, but it's God, for lack of a better word. These are the conclusions that Clowes literally drew: "I had these many ideas that I'd sketched out," he explains, "and somehow I created a way to link them all together that made sense, had some meaning." In this respect Clowes is like Joseph Conrad, whose Marlowe said that a story's meaning is not inside the story but outside it, in the *unseen*. Cloudy meanings surround the story and render its meaning visible as haze illuminates the halo around the moon.



The dime-store god.

But what is the halo surrounding the story? From the first bolt, light is the most dominant visual metaphor. Epps and the wife of the singing gynecologist lie in adultery with all the lights on while the cuckold himself hums a familiar tune and peers deep into another dark maw of human birth with his penlight. The characters are looking for something, mainly themselves, and in doing so they imitate those who've come before. The light of Clowes' story illuminates every corner of a world where everybody is at best a copycat; at worst, a plagiarist: "I think that everybody, every artist is, to some degree," Dan says. "I have a lot of trouble seeing where my style begins and where the styles of my influences end. It's something I want to figure out." But the story, as anybody who has read it knows, contains no easy answers. "I'm not sure that story helped me figure anything out," Clowes admits, "but it made for an interesting tension to keep the story going." Although he maintains that he's not necessarily accusing himself of plagiarism, the story smells to me like guilt. Here's the catch-22: if a conscience accuses itself of failing, isn't it then working? Or can people turn their conscience on and off like a light switch, as a gynecologist should turn off his sexual impulse?



Art critics are tricked by Epps' prankster friend, Peach, into seeing pornography as fine art.

Epps' art appears in Peach's porno magazine.

"There are few, if any, objectors," says the dime-store god. "After all, who wants to look foolish criticizing what is clearly an ironic statement...." But Epps says that the "innocence" of stereotypes is what inspired him. He complains, "Everything today is so 'ironic' and 'self-conscious.'"

OUR CONSCIENCE in the story is troubled by Epps' use of racist stereotypes and caricatures to earn big money as a fine artist and a commercial artist. This idea came to Clowes both from without and from within. From without, from a society where advertisers have used photos of victims of AIDS and genocide to sell top-dollar fashions, fulfilling all Orwell's prophecies of doublethink. Advertising now goes as high as it can go by going as low as it can go, albeit under the guise of irony: "It sort of has this patina of pc-ness to it," Clowes says. "I think there's a lot of stuff on teevee that's very borderline questionable in terms of what it's saying about groups of people. I think there's stuff that's not too far from that; I was only simplifying it to an extent." Does he think such blatant stereotyping would fly in real life? "No, that was tweaked a little bit. I think something that's maybe not so cut and dried as that would fly in a *slightly* different climate. I could see something like that happening and there not being that much of a response to it."

But Clowes also sees the stereotypes arise from within himself. Epps' love of stereotypes is rooted in his nostalgia—and nostalgia is one of Dan's deepest yearnings. It worries him. I asked Dan for his general understanding of what he's called the psychopathology of nostalgia. "That title was based on an article I found in an old psychoanalytic journal. As I read it I realized that this guy was basically talking about me. It made me very uncomfortable. The article said specifically: 'The nostalgic will go to old movies and be unhappy because the audience laughs in the wrong places.' Things like that. I thought, 'Oh my god, I'm deeply troubled here.' So I tried to look at it in the harsh light of reality. There's a lot of trouble to being nostalgic because you can't really edit every-

thing out of the past. You *can* just be nostalgic for the music of the 1920s, but then you sort of inherently have to accept the way the culture was back then, and there are many things that were obviously wrong with the culture. It's a deep problem. It's a conundrum." Dan's understanding of the racism inherent in his nostalgia seems right, yet not entirely justified. To me, it's downright puritanical. I wonder, is his sympathy for humanity supposed to come at his own expense? Because this humor, if that's what it is, is so—forgive me—black that I can find little to laugh at. It's *scary*. "I try to be mean," he agreed. "I try to be hard on myself." I told him that he was indeed. "Good," he nodded. Clowes has turned his unforgiving and sometimes unfair eye for satire on himself.

If Dan's childhood immersion in urban, leftist, academic culture made him own up to any inner demons, it also made him more than a little naïve. He says that, as a boy, "I realized that there was racism in the world but I had never been confronted with it directly. I'd had it directed toward me by black kids in the neighborhood, but white racists in a position of power, exerting that racism and that power for no real reason other than to make themselves feel better? I'd never seen an example of that." Dan first became aware that all was not well when he moved to New York as an art-school student. "New York was the most racist place I have ever lived. I used to go to the actual pizzeria that was in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*. It's right on Myrtle Avenue. They really did have pictures of Vic Damone on the wall. I'd hear these guys say stuff that I'd never heard before in my life. Even art students whom you would think of as liberal, you'd hear them say the most amazingly, outrageously racist stuff." It's clear to me from Dan's other comix and from talking to him that he is not a racist—but in "Gynecology" there seems to be no difference between living in a racist society and supporting it.

The man who sells Epps his Sambo figurines.

It's apparent that as Clowes digs deeper and deeper within himself, he throws the stones he finds not at himself but at a dummy, a likeness. Like the nostalgic brat who narrates "MCMLXVI," Epps is only partly Clowes. It's as though Clowes were both claiming and disclaiming the sin, showing sympathy yet condemnation. It's displaced guilt. But there is no dogma to Clowes' guilt—he even distances himself from his own artistic pronouncements of guilt. The black and white couple in the story, Bunny and Lieberman, who act as mouthpieces for the moral perspective on nostalgia outlined above by Clowes, are themselves compromised by their own plagiarism and hypocrisy. "I don't think there's anybody else in that story who's held in a less harsh light," Clowes says. "I sort of keep everybody in the same light." The light doesn't get turned off in the world of "Gynecology." We're all guilty.

ASKED IF HE SUFFERS from liberal guilt, Clowes hums a skeptical note that neither rises to assent nor descends to no. "I do have a certain amount of guilt that keeps me somewhat in tune with what's

going on," he admits, "but whatever comes out in my work is pretty much accidental, just something in my personality that comes through." To Dan, politics have no place in art, mainly because this is America and nobody's listening anyway. "I would never think, 'Affirmative action is good, so I'm going to do a character that shows that in one of my stories.' I can't stand that kind of writing," he sighs. "I hate the Upton Sinclairs of the world. I throw the book across the room. If you really want to do political things, don't be an artist, because nobody cares about what artists do. You're only speaking to other semi-intellectuals and other artists, so it's not going to change the world. Go to Hollywood and make a blockbuster."

BUT THAT'S OKAY! I THINK IT'S GREAT THAT
EVEN THOUGH YOU LIVE IN UNSPEAKABLE
SQUALOR AND I LIVE IN A MANSION SO
BIG I'VE NEVER EVEN SEEN HALF THE ROOMS
WE CAN STILL BE FRIENDS!
YEAH!

Insignificant Shrimp and Willie Willions discuss what's so darn great about children's comics.

But just because Clowes doesn't preach to the choir doesn't mean that he doesn't have a message. I refuse to believe that, in this era of identity politics, a story about an artist who makes his fortune painting Sambo dolls, buck-toothed chinamen, and hook-nosed Shylocks is not a political story. "Any subject matter is good if it's part of the psychological body of the work," he shrugs. "If it comes out in the inner life of the story, that's fine." Perhaps the political signifier in Clowes' work is the absence of politics. After all, his pen drips contempt for Epps at several points in the story, particularly as Epps passes through a ghetto. "I think there's a reason all the sort of, *naked* characters I do about myself tend to be very self-centered and apolitical," Dan says, "because that's something I worry about in myself. I feel like I'm very narcissistic and solipsistic and not involved in a community at all—and not really interested in it. On a very real level, I can't say I'd be upset if ninety percent of humanity was just wiped out. On a very real level, I'd be extremely happy if it was the right ninety percent." He chuckles. "It's hard for me to reconcile that." Then why does he claim that he only feels comfortable in an urban environment? Why hasn't he moved into a cabin in Wisconsin—a fantasy he admits to? "Yeah," Clowes concedes. "I'd feel guilty, like I was giving up. I'd feel like I was escaping. I think I'd feel *really* guilty. I feel guilty for how nicely I live now." Dan Clowes feels guilty about not feeling guilty.

The Clowesian protagonist of "The Gold Mommy" gets his head checked.

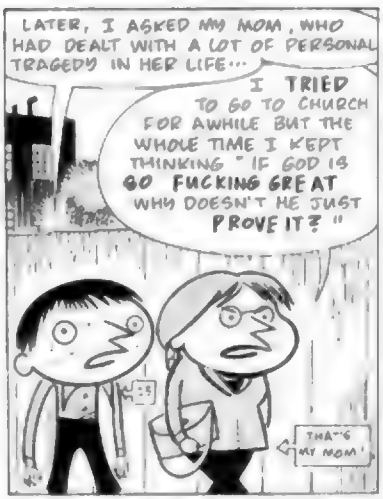
CHILDHOOD is another conundrum of Dan's. Childhood, or the lack of it, is perhaps the root of an adult's nostalgia, and in Clowes' universe everyone, it seems, is trying to hang on to their childhood. Enid clutches her Goofie Gus doll, plays her kid records over and over when

IN FACT, I REMEMBER WHEN I WAS LITTLE I DECIDED THAT I WOULD BELIEVE IN GOD WHEN I WAS OLD, JUST SO I COULD DEAL WITH DEATH... SO I ASKED MY GRANDMOTHER, WHO WAS REALLY OLD, WHAT SHE THOUGHT ABOUT GOD...
IT WOULD BE NICE TO THINK THAT SOMETHING HAPPENS AFTER YOU DIE, BUT THAT JUST SEEMS SO RIDICULOUS...
AGE 10

she's low. The narrator of "MCMLXVI" hangs on to his ray gun and Batmask. In his moment of truth, Epps sees the Dr. Disguise dolls he collected as a child. Clowes clearly misses his childhood—or does he? "That's a big paradox," he says. "I would never, ever, want to relive my childhood. I was miserable."

Maybe that's why Clowes is obsessed with it. Being raised by his grandparents, both of whom took ill and needed little Daniel to take care of them, instilled in Daniel an almost overwhelming sense of mortality. "I could see them dying. I felt like everything was in total flux and changing, and they were going to die before I got out of high school. There was really this fear of things changing. I still have this dread of the future that I'm trying to conquer. I have this very strong urge to make things last, just to give myself some kind of solidity in life." Hence the nostalgia; hence the collecting and treasuring of artifacts; hence the kitsch. The very thing that made the past miserable—impermanence—makes it now seem preferable to the future.

Nostalgia isn't rooted in happy memories or relationships; for Clowes, it's almost the opposite: it's rooted in poignant memories and isolation. "You fetishize objects," he said, "and objects take the place of people. So it's more of a return to the objects that I had to make into my friends. That's sort of a simplified way of putting it, but it's true. I put a lot more stock in an old chair in my living room than a kid who has lots of friends or who had brothers and sisters would have done." This lonely void is not only the root of Clowes' nostalgia but, perhaps, his artistic impulse. Clowes thinks it's the root of most impulses, the driver of most people's lives: "I think everybody has the void they're trying to fill with whatever they do, whether they're workaholics or a drug addict or an alcoholic or a womanizer or whatever. I think art is just one of those things. So certainly the roots are in a miserable childhood."


LATER, I ASKED MY MOM, WHO HAD DEALT WITH A LOT OF PERSONAL TRAGEDY IN HER LIFE...
I TRIED TO GO TO CHURCH FOR AWHILE BUT THE WHOLE TIME I KEPT THINKING "IF GOD IS SO FUCKING GREAT WHY DOESN'T HE JUST PROVE IT?"
THAT'S MY MOM!

This page: from "Why I Hate Christians."

The birth of Daniel Gillespie Clowes was a miracle—sort of. His parents had been forced to get married ten years earlier by the accidental conception of Daniel's older brother. By the time of Daniel's conception their already-shotgun marriage had greatly deteriorated. "I don't think they liked each other very much at the time I was conceived, so it's a miracle that I exist," Daniel said in one of two previous interviews covering his childhood in Chicago. These interviews—in 1988 with Monte Beauchamp in *Blab!* magazine and in 1992 with Gary Groth in *The Comics Journal*—are particularly revealing because of the way Clowes summarizes his life, performs the necessary re-presentation of the facts to form a coherent life story. His comedy has, as always, its beginning in tragedy.

In "Like A Weed, Joe," a pubescent Rodger Young scratches out his message to the girl in the Christ family next door.

Daniel's parents divorced after his birth and his mother then married the owner of a south side garage and auto-parts store. But infant Daniel's stepfather was crushed to death only two years later when the stock car he was racing rolled over on top of him. Although she never drove an automobile again, Daniel's mother became a mechanic herself and continued to run the shop. However, she wasn't able to handle all of her responsibilities alone. Daniel's mother—whom Clowes describes as "more like a wayward sister" than a traditional mother—and her University of Chicago academic parents formed a committee-family of sorts to jointly raise Daniel. "I grew up in an almost socialist atmosphere," Daniel remembered, "...a very intensely pc, liberal atmosphere. It was the kind of neighborhood where all the parents listen to folk songs and talk about Eugene Debs." Clowes' publisher, Gary Groth, quipped: "Perhaps Dan Quayle would understand *Eightball* now."

As Daniel Gillespie's bop namesake implies, the Cloweses were lovers of popular culture. Daniel grew up listening to Tom Lehrer records on the family phonograph. "My parents were book collectors," Daniel said, "and they were obsessive about never throwing anything away." Daniel's older brother had by then grown into what Daniel describes as "a frighteningly smart guy," who, like most teens, was caught up in the spirit of the late 1960s. In this spirit, Daniel's brother left the household and went to California, where he eventually became the inmate with the highest tested IQ in the history of the California penal system. But before he left, he amassed a gigantic book and magazine collection. "[He] was a media junkie," Daniel said. "He bought probably every DC comic and every Marvel comic, and *Famous Monsters of Filmland,* and *Hot Rod* maga-

zine, and *Playboy* and all that stuff." That stuff also included "a million" of the underground comix of the 1960s. Everything was permitted: "We just had it all lying around in this communal room that we had," Daniel remembered, "and nobody ever tried to keep me from any of it."

Daniel's earliest memories were impressions made in this communal room, as a preliterate child sorting through every branch of our popular culture, puzzling over the bizarre fruits of so many imaginations. "I can remember looking at a lot of old DC comics before I could read," he said, "and reading them like hieroglyphics; there'd be a panel where people are kissing, and I'd think, 'He's trying to bite her face off.' I wouldn't really know what they were doing." Within these larger misunderstandings, Daniel developed a confounded understanding of sorts. One image in particular made a deep impression on him: the cover to an issue of *Strange Adventures*. The illustration showed a typical family trying to drink from a fountain underneath a gigantic hot sun. "The family is sweating," Daniel recalled, "but for some reason all the water is frozen, and the kids are trying to drink this frozen water out of a fountain. I can remember seeing that cover and then starting to cry and bashing my head against the wall.... I thought, 'How can this be? It's so hot and yet the water is *frozen.*'" Dan laughed at the memory. "These images had real power over me."

These images made Daniel want to draw them himself. "I remember looking at a *Superboy* or *Jimmy Olsen* comic book for hours and thinking, 'How did this guy draw these lines?' And having no idea how someone could draw perfect smooth lines like that. I remember wanting to be able to do that very badly. This is before I was able to read, so I must have been three or four." Daniel began copying superheroes onto sheets of stationery, trying to match his lines to those in the fictions that surrounded him. Relatives and his parents were enthusiastic when presented with his efforts. They told him that he was very talented, and that his drawings were great. Of course, Clowes said, "They would have said that if I'd drawn the worst piece of shit. But at that time I really took it as encouragement." This misunderstanding, he maintained, was perhaps the prime factor in his continuing effort and eventual successes: "I think that had a lot to do with it."

The Christ girl writes back.

The goal that young Daniel was drawing toward was *Mad* magazine. "The first day I saw *Mad,* it changed my life." Daniel asserted. "I remember I was in first grade; I could barely read, but I was obsessed with it." Daniel's prehensile mind seized upon the image of Alfred

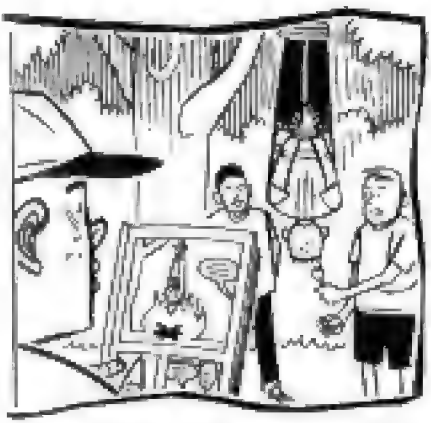
E. Neuman's leering face. "The covers," Daniel remembered, "the Norman Mingo covers used to really get to me....This was before I could really read,

This page: from Clowes' take on Fredric Wertham's infamous 1953 indictment of comic books, The Seduction of the Innocent.

so it had nothing to do with what they were parodying. It was just the *look* of it." His grandmother held an issue up to Daniel. "Why do you want to read this?" she demanded, pointing at Neuman's face. "Look at this boy—he's an idiot!" Despite this pressure, or perhaps because of it, Daniel's conviction was firm: "I wanted to work for *Mad,*" he said. "That was my goal at age six. I had no goal other than that."

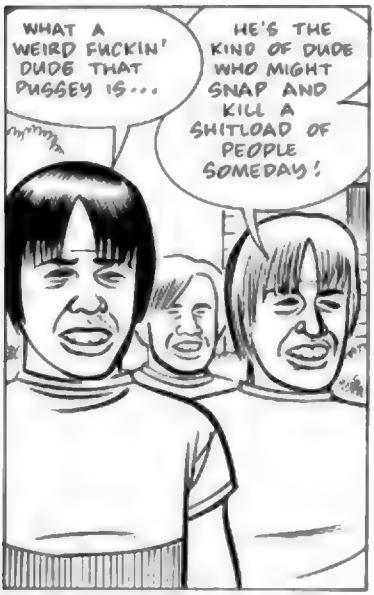
And what of the underground comix laying around his brother's haunt? Ironically—but not surprisingly—one of today's best underground cartoonists had mixed feelings about the comix he read in the third grade. "I didn't really think of them as comics," Daniel said. "I thought of them as pornography...the early undergrounds seemed really alien to me, and I didn't relate to them at all. I still don't completely." Not that this feeling of alienation stopped him from enjoying them—or treasuring them. In addition to his brother's comix, Daniel had a pile of undergrounds all his own. His aunt had mistaken a pile of *Zap* and *Wonder Warthog* comix at her house for young Daniel's superhero comics; she mailed the comix to Daniel's house with a note explaining that he must have forgotten them at her house. "It was the greatest day of my life," Clowes told Monte Beauchamp. "I still have some of them." Daniel and one of his rare childhood friends were so impressed by Robert Crumb that they drew their own issue of *Big Ass* comix. In the third grade, Daniel explained, "We thought it was absolutely the funniest name in the world."

But another part of Daniel looked at what he was doing, and was ashamed. Despite his family's open and accepting attitude toward the ephemera layering the end tables and bookshelves of their household, Daniel of his own free will felt guilty about reading this pornography. "I'd sneak them over to a corner



"I'm so glad I didn't read the full-length Jack Chick comics when I was little," Daniel says. "They might've really fucked me up."

somewhere and read them when nobody was around." Although he treasured underground comics, Daniel didn't exactly love them. "They were pretty outlandish when I was eight years old," he said. "Even now it's pretty heavy."



This page: an episode in Clowes' semi-autobiographical satire of the comics industry and all its dorks, Dan Pussey.

Meanwhile, Daniel had entered the University of Chicago Laboratory School, a school for the children of faculty members. Like him, the 75 or so children in Daniel's class were "children of really smart Jewish intellectual liberal types," Daniel recalled. "There was this intense sameness about the kinds of kids that went there." Although Daniel got good grades, he had no talent for popularity. "I never got along with anyone there except the losers, outcasts, and misfits," he said. "I was definitely a loner."

Like many who later go into art, he occupied himself in his isolation by drawing pictures and fantasies. Although being a pariah made him the obvious target of bullies, Daniel attempted to appease them by playing the funny man; not the class clown, but the quiet, nerdy subversive. "I would draw pictures of teachers picking their noses and stuff like that," he recalled. "I'd always go farther than the other artists in school. I had no taboos." By the time he was in the third grade and under the sway of *Mad* and *Zap,* Daniel knew everybody in his school and they knew him. "I had done something to offend everybody in the school at that point," Daniel said, "and then I had to go another ten years with these same kids. By the time I was in high school I just hated everybody, and they hated me, and everybody hated each other."

Teenage Daniel masked the inner sting of rejection by adopting the pose of arbitrary contrariness: he marched about determinedly to 78 r.p.m. John Philip Sousa records rather than move to the

omnipresent, long-playing grooves of Yes and Zep. Doing most things in a deliberately unpopular way made Daniel appear to be a self-selected rather than branded geek, but he probably fooled none of his classmates and certainly came

no closer to fulfilling his desire for a truer expression of his self. "The thing about going to school with the same eighty kids for your entire life is that if you were to try to change your personality at all, these kids knew you so well that they'd know it was some kind of phony thing, that you were just trying to create some new image." That was exactly what Daniel did want to do: "All my life I'd been wanting to reinvent myself in the way I knew I could be." But he let his classmates trap him inside of his own self-image. Daniel's chance for escape came his senior year of high school in the form of acceptance at Brooklyn's Pratt Institute. He graduated without having dated a girl and left immediately for New York City.

This spread: From Art School Confidential.

"I REALLY FELL in love with the city," Daniel said of his arrival in New York. "I really liked the fact that it was this decaying island of hedonists." Because Daniel's grandfather was his guardian, the University of Chicago paid Daniel's tuition in full; because Daniel's stepfather had been killed Daniel received four or five hundred dollars a month in social security benefits. He was free in New York with a steady supply of spending cash. "That was the greatest time of my life," he claimed.

The first thing Daniel did upon arrival in New York was to immediately implement his long-awaited reinvention. It's fitting that, given his history of adamantly contrary behavior, he adopted the pose and philosophy of total fractiousness: punk. Although Daniel's need for punk music and punk culture was deep, his adoption of it was for the same reason as always: to be different. The boy who air-tubaed in high school again said "Fuck you" to the popular crowd—in this case the aging baby boomers now entrenched in the coastal media establishments like *Rolling Stone*—by again acting deliberately like an idiot. But Daniel was not only reacting to his New York context; he was also reacting to his liberal background. "It was very hard for me to rebel against my parents," he said, "because they were so cool and accepting of anything I would do...I could have dyed my hair green and gotten a pierced septum and come home and they would say, 'Oh, you look cute.' Basically, the only thing I could do was embrace the punk philosophy of utter stupidity. That would be the only thing that would offend my parents, the really crass stupidity." Gary Groth asked Clowes why, if he wanted so badly to rebel, didn't he just become a Republican? "Well, it wasn't that far from it," Dan replied. "In a lot of the attitudes. I wasn't political enough to do that. I wasn't *that* crazy."

Daniel's politics extended only as far as his myopia allowed; he was against Reagan only because he felt sure that newly-elected Reagan was going to use the newly-reinstated draft to send young Daniel to battle the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. "Other than that I really didn't give a shit," he recalled, adding with characteristic self-deprecation, "I've always been pretty much interested in my own little world." Other than punk, Daniel's own little world consisted of what he considered to be an average art

student's cultural immersion: American underground and French films, reading "Burroughs and Bukowski and all that shit," as he put it. "It's all so cliché, it's hard to talk about."

Although Daniel learned a lot at Pratt, he insisted that he learned nothing *from* Pratt. He remembered only one teacher, a painter of Harlequin romance covers, who taught him how to mix a flesh tone. That was it, Clowes said. "He was the only guy who was honest about actually teaching us a specific technique." Many people have told Clowes throughout his career that he was lucky—which itself he does not dispute—and that his luck consisted of having four years at one of the most famous art schools in the country to learn and practice the craft of cartooning. "That's kinda what gets my goat," he said. "I learned nothing of what I do now in art school. Absolutely nothing. Every bit of it I had to figure out for myself. I didn't even have tips." So although Daniel has a B.F.A on his wall—"like a dentist's office"—he considers himself completely self-taught.

DANIEL GRADUATED from Pratt in 1984. The greatest time of his life had peaked, along with his confidence. He walked out of Pratt with the blessings of his teachers, who told him that he should have been freelancing for years. He stepped into the offices of New York City publishers as though he were the next Seymour Chwast.

Daniel persevered as publishing's image-makers ignored his vision. Although he almost never got past the receptionists, he continued to leave his still-distressingly-crisp portfolio with them, day after day: *Time, Fortune, Esquire*...all the big boys. Nothing. For months. Eventually he found himself trying to get work in the porn industry, then the lowest of the low: a magazine for doll collectors. "That was the most depressing time in my life," he remembered. "That was even worse than high school." He had no work, less and less money and little or no idea what he was going to do next to earn a living. "I'd better accomplish something," he said to himself, "or I'm going to blow my brains out."

Driven by despair, Daniel sat down and did what he'd always wanted to do: actually draw comix. Again, Daniel's misunderstandings about the value of his work ironically helped him: "The fact that I was so unfamiliar with the existing comics market really helped me, because

"Remember," Clowes warns, "the only piece of paper less valuable than one of your paintings is a B.F.A. degree."

if I had known how few people there were that would publish my work, I might not have even thought about it." With a mindlessness worthy of a Zen monk, he simply sat down to draw. Out sprang a character: tall, white, clean-cut, smoking an ever-present cig: *American*. Lloyd Llewellyn delivered himself. "There was no thought that went into it

at all," Daniel said. "That very first panel in that very first story was the first drawing I did of him. I was stuck with him after that." Lloyd Llewellyn's character followed from his thoughtless creation. With no idea what he was doing, Clowes naturally tried to keep open every single option. Therefore Lloyd Llewellyn was a cipher at his birth. "I wanted not necessarily an innocent in a corrupt world," Clowes said, "but a straight man to a wacky world." *Lloyd Llewellyn* was picked up by Fantagraphics Books and Dan's career as a cartoonist began in 1986.

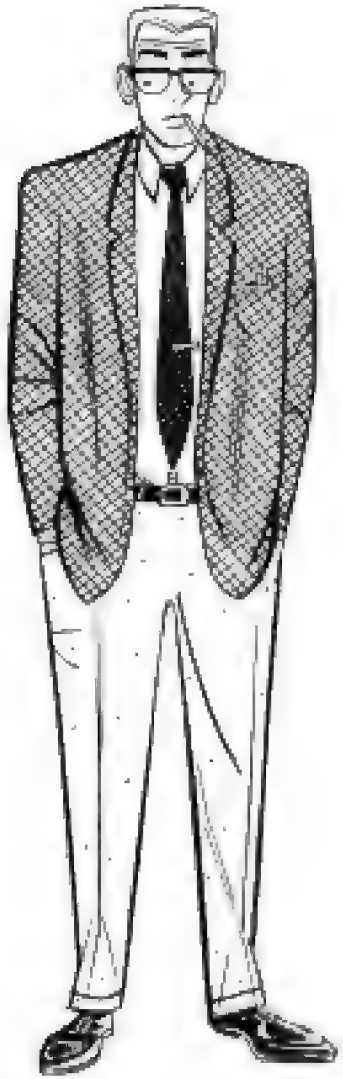
OVER TEN YEARS later *Lloyd Llewellyn* remains a mixture of modesty and ambition: ambitious in that Clowes managed to cram in it almost every single pop-culture obsession of his youth, summarized nicely by issue one's Kurtzmaniac *Mad*-like cover; ambitious also in that each issue grew more and more sophisticated graphically, proving a fast learner at work; yet ultimately a modest comix in that it remained thoroughly comic in every imaginable way, laffs from so many angles that it wasn't actually about anything.

This initial aimlessness was due in part to Clowes' ambivalence toward the dominant visual aesthetic, an aesthetic so strong that it, more than plot or character, was what *Lloyd Llewellyn* was about: Men. Men in the *early* 1960s, in skinny ties, in padded suits, and in power—but not necessarily in control. Loaded men with loaded sidearms and, in Lloyd's case, a loaded sidekick (quasi-ethnic, natch). And women, of course, plenty of women who were nothing but trouble—mainly because the men were too dumb to learn. Clowes called this aesthetic "space-age machismo," but it was never clear what the author's intentions were other than silliness. Now Clowes admits to being a bit two-faced about his intentions: "*Lloyd Llewellyn* was really a fake parody. It was me drawing this stuff that I loved, and wanted to draw, and then pretending that it was a parody so that people wouldn't make fun of me." He laughs. "The very best reviews I got dealt with it as a 'brilliant parody.' I would think, 'These people don't

have a clue what they're talking about. I love this stuff!'" And if they did have a clue? "They'd think I was part of the problem."

THE PROBLEM being sexism. It's literally a big problem: gigantic tits. Clowes' explanation—"I think that's because I couldn't draw women at all"—I buy, but only at half-price. After all, this is an artist who appears in red-blooded-American-male magazines like *Cad* and *Randy*. I press him regarding his nostalgia for space-age machismo and hear the magic words: "I dunno," he murmurs. "To me it has this quaintness to it. It seems so divorced from the way the world was at that time; it had this *unreality* to it that I found very interesting. I've got to say, whenever I've gone to a strip club or something I'm almost totally bored and uncomfortable and don't find it all that interesting in person, and yet somehow the idea of that lust world in my comics was very appealing to me. I'm not really...I can't really...put it in a more particular...just the whole dynamic is interesting to me, the weird power structure that is involved in that."

Power structure? "It's a weird thing. I find it very appealing, visually. I don't mean sexually appealing, but to draw the lines and the curves and the look—I really like to draw women in full bondage gear. That latex look. But I couldn't be less interested sexually in it. Absolutely uninteresting. My wife is the same way. She really likes that kind of rubber and latex stuff. She's always buying those magazines with pictures of it. Her mother's convinced that I'm a pervert and that I've gotten her involved in some kind of sadistic scene." Clowes is adamant that he couldn't keep a straight face if he and his wife tried to actually dress up and act out a sexual power trip. His face is perfectly straight as he tells me this. "Completely



not interesting to us, except in this visual way. Just the look of it. I don't think our personalities have to be related to it, that much. I mean, it's just a pure aesthetic choice."

While we're on the subject of pure aesthetic choices, I ask Dan about his recent work for *Hustler* magazine. The main appeal of working for them is, of course, the money. It's good money, Dan says, as good as *Time* or *Newsweek*—and they pay right away. But Clowes chooses *Hustler* because he especially likes their attitude: "They're the only maga-

zine that will call you up and say, 'We want you to illustrate this stupid article,' in a totally self-deprecating way. 'It's a dumb article that we *made up* about a child molester. We're pretending it's a real exposé, or an interview, or *something*. Just do a really, really sleazy painting.' They never ask for sketches. Never ask for changes. You do whatever you want and they love it. They're so funny to deal with. They have such a cynical view of what they're doing." To a slight but, I think, more important extent, *Hustler* fits Dan's aesthetic of perversity: "It's sort of vaguely amusing to me to be involved in it," he says, "because it is the stupidest, sleaziest magazine. The whole editorial thrust is so weird. It's this false audience that Flynt's created—this libertarian, redneck liberal. I don't think it's in line with anybody's philosophy. It's a totally created thing." As with space-age machismo, it's a sense of *unreality* that draws Clowes to mess-age porno.

Clowes assures me that he's been criticized for his portrayal of women as sex objects—but not from anybody whose opinions he cares about. "I don't care about anybody's opinion," he says. "That's the problem." I mention other cartoonists whose work he respects. He replies, "All the cartoonists I know whose work I respect have much deeper problems with women, or men, than I do." He laughs. "That's part and parcel of the whole thing. That's sort of what we're playing out here."

Velvet Glove*'s Clay Loudermilk tries to locate his estranged wife after unexpectedly viewing her in a sadomasochistic film.*

FOR A LONG TIME many people other than me suspected this immaturity in Clowes. I thought by the time of *Eightball* 12 that the only thing holding Clowes back was Clowes himself. This was at least partly due to the fact that I didn't look long enough into his disturbing, ten-part comix opus, *Like a Velvet Glove Cast in Iron,* to see that the mature work I craved was right under my nose, hidden in symbols that didn't so much add up as accumulate, and which I was too impatient to do the work of actually weighing. But it was also because Clowes was too shy to admit completely the vulnerability I demanded; a vulnerability which, although subtly present in the pages of his work, I viewed and exaggerated through my own projections.

Until *Eightball* 13 and the publication of "Blue Italian Shit." "Blue Italian Shit," itself a reference in the story to wearing absurd, costly fashions, was Clowes' breakthrough, the point where he laid bare all his romantic tendencies in a way both forgiving and unsparing. Rodger Young, the narrator, is in essence a kind, sensitive kid without the courage to turn his sensitivity into principles. He wears false, tough-guy principles like he wears his leather jacket. The story is set up so that it's technically about Rodger losing his virginity, but by the last panel that loss is an anticlimax, an afterthought. The story is really about a boy trying to live up to society's terrifying, absurd definition of masculinity, and hating it, yet still wearing the shell. At every moment of truth,

Rodger clams up to protect the pearl of his romanticism. It's a clearly autobiographical story—"between forty and sixty percent true," Clowes admits. It's hard to trust my own reasons for elation at reading the story because I identified so

Rodger Young is afraid of girls. But boy, does he want them.

much with Rodger Young: brand-new in an old, crumbling city; wearing a black leather jacket to protect me in my nightly peregrinations; feeling closer to my virginity than I had since the night I'd lost it. But in retrospect I was right about the story: "Blue Italian Shit" was not only a coming-of-age story in itself but also for Clowes as an author. The story was the first merging of the personal probing of *Like a Velvet Glove...* with the articulate focus of his previous rants against society. It's not his best story, but it's the most personal and therefore perhaps the most pivotal of his post-*Velvet* work. It was a naked attempt to say goodbye to machismo and to spoof romanticism at the same time. Now that Clowes had turned his sarcastic eye on himself and mustered an amount of compassion, there was nothing he couldn't do, as evidenced by the consistently improving stories that immediately followed it, one after another: that same issue's much more ambitious *Ghost World,* then "The Gold Mommy"; "Like A Weed, Joe"; "Immortal, Invisible"; "Caricature," and finally, "Gynecology."

NOT COINCIDENTALLY, a concurrent trend is Clowes' making every issue harder and harder for himself to complete, both as a writer and as an artist. There's a direct relationship between Clowes' frustration and the quality of his stories. "I would say around issue twelve or thirteen," he says, "I just got slower and slower." He explains that he used to do very little revision. "In those days I was much happier with what I was doing, which is weird because I look back on it now and I would give anything to be able to burn it all. It's a terrible, terrible thing. Most people can look back on their work and feel happy about it. I feel awful about it." Every panel, he explains, now goes through many intricate stages. "Now I have such a high level of expectation for myself that it's very, very difficult to meet it," he says. "I'm expecting much more out of

This page: from "Caricature."

myself than I'm delivering, so I'm constantly frustrated." He laughs. "I'm killing myself." Only two 36-page issues of *Eightball* came out last year, yet Clowes works like a scribe at his desk from evening until sunrise every single night. He makes his equation between knowledge and labor perfectly clear: the more he learns about comix, the longer it takes him to draw them. The nocturnal creator sees geometric possibilities going off in every direction.

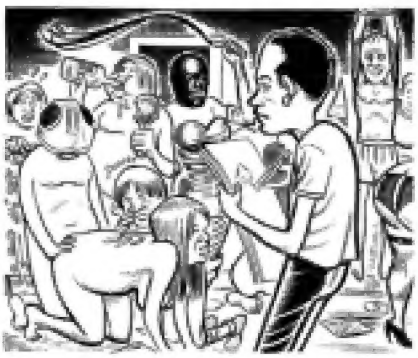
FACES HAVE ALWAYS been Clowes' favorite subject; they're his strength, and a statement about where his priorities lie as an artist. I don't think it's a coincidence that he's also one of the best writers in comix: it's that focus on character, on the human. He's got a theory on faces, one played out at least in part in the story "Caricature." In the story a traveling caricaturist, Mal Rosen, ekes out a meager living by doing state-fair-style caricatures of people, the kind of caricatures which take unique, not-necessarily pretty people and bland them all to goofy icons—what Clowes calls "the happy mass of sameness." The irony of Mal's approach is, of course, that the original idea of caricature was physiognomy: to render a unique, often grotesque, inner state. Although the story's about many other things—primarily the importance of illusions in chasing a goal—the difference between the current practice of caricature and the original practice of caricature is remarkably similar to what Clowes himself is trying to do with comix. He's trying to maintain the simple, iconic tradition of comix faces—a tradition which by its very simplicity allows the reader to project herself onto the character; in effect, to identify with the character—while also trying to capture the verisimilitude of photography, which, in comix, can distance the reader.* It's not easy to merge the two languages, to balance the subjective and the objective. "I'm trying to create a new visual language of how to draw humans," Clowes states. The artist who is trying to find some sympathy for humanity says that, in a comix context, a normal person appears ugly simply because we're so used to the simplified,

*For the original and much better explanation of this theory, read *Understanding Comics*, by Scott McCloud. Tundra Publishing Ltd, 1993.

beautified comic language. "Ideally I'd like to draw these very specific, not exactly ugly *or* pretty types— but it's hard to get that across in a comic where everything's so iconic. If I were to draw somebody who is thought of as beautiful in a very accurate but still comic style— she wouldn't even look beautiful unless I exaggerated things properly. Her eyes would look too small and her face would have a weird shape." Playing devil's advocate, I ask Clowes a question from one of his own stories: Why are your people so ugly? "We see enough beautiful people," he says to me. We're sitting in a Berkeley café peopled by some of the brightest youth of America's Golden State. "I look at the world and I don't see that many beautiful people."

As a comic artist Daniel Clowes has been largely ignored both by Comics and by Art—at least by the buyers of each business. One of the continuing obsessions of *Eightball* has been the relationship between art and commerce, and hilarious observations about the sometimes inverted relationship between art's merit and its price. Considering that Clowes makes a decent living not from *Eightball* but from album covers and the porn industry, considering that the only way he was even able to produce *Lloyd Llewellyn* and the earlier *Eightball* was by living for free through luck and thrift with friends and relatives, he's bitter. He says so—"bitter"—with a lilt that almost turns it into two syllables of laughter. But the way he sighs out his explanation of grievances against the Aht Wuld indicates stoic acceptance more than his younger anger or hysteria: "You just feel like people who are interested in becoming successful fine artists are interested in coming up with something that plays off of people's expectations in the art world, rather than actually sitting down in a room and producing something of meaning to them. It's like they're second-guessing the whole question of, What is Art? To me that gets really tiresome. It's part of this whole system where you're responding to what's been done before, rather than what you're actually interested in yourself."

Clowes is resigned to his fate as a middleman between comics and art. In a way, that's become his stance. In his typically self-deprecating style, Dan does not define himself as an artist. "I've always thought it was a good idea to just call them comics, and call yourself a cartoonist." He explains that it used to be considered an insult to call a film a movie: you were abbreviating the podunk phrase, *movin' pitchers*. But now, calling a movie a film can be pretentious—and comics are comix, not graphically sequential narratives. This filmic cartoonist sees a similarity: "When you're part of the lowly tradition of comics it tends to be a very liberating ex-



perience. With a history so limited, there's so much that can be done. It's virgin territory." The attraction of the medium and the curse of the medium are almost identical: total freedom and guaranteed obscurity—a hipster's paradise. Or hell.

CLOWES SEEMS to have internalized this paradox; in fact, it fits his aesthetic of perversity to a t-square. Although he was practically born into this damned art form, this fallen world of comix, and has done as much as anybody to champion or redeem it, Clowes also deliberately draws work that will justify the general condemnation of comix. The key to his puzzle is *sleaze*. On the one hand, it can be discouraging: "I want people to see comics exactly the way I do. I see that it has this sort of inherently sleazy quality, but I can see beyond that, see the potential of the medium, what it really is. It bothers me that people always see the sleazy part of it, but I think that I've tried to deal with that for so long that I've gotten to the point where it just sort of amuses me that people only see comics as completely trashy. I realize that people have bigger things on their minds than the Meaning of Comic Books." But on the other hand, Dan Clowes has done so much to keep the sleaze *in* comix. He elevates the form to the level of literature and yet he refuses to take out the trash; your comix, I tell him, are both Art with the capital *A* and comix with the *x*. "All right!" he says—his one and only exclamation point during the hours we spent together.

He's aware of the balance he holds between the high and the low, yet he finds it difficult and probably destructive to articulate any reasoning or thinking that goes into maintaining the equilibrium. "That's something that I'm dealing with on a day-to-day basis," he says. "It's something I'm so close to I can hardly even comment on it." Dan Clowes is sure of one thing, however: he has to be wary of the desire to grow up. He refers to his "giant battle plan to make comics acceptable as art," but in almost the same breath asserts that there's a faith to be kept. "I think you have to be true to comics to some degree," he says. "The history of comics is so spotty and disreputable that I think it's important to maintain the tradition, to keep true to what comics have cultivated, which is this sleazy, low-down, back-alley demeanor." The sleaze may be discouraging, he explains, but it's also valuable: "You can't be a sculptor and have that behind you," he says. "It's something you can't buy." That's Daniel Gillespie Clowes' final truth: by necessity and by choice, he's a believer in his own inheritance.

The "meaning" of Velvet Glove *in a nutshell.*

I saw a thing on some talk show about the cartoonist who wrote it... He got a lot of money from the movie and became a coffee addict and then he got into heavy debt with the mob and now he's a born-again christian!
on your way to a world that others might have missed

Still others will reproduce and force their annoying peculiarities on the next generation... I have devised my own humble bid for eternity, a scheme in which YOU play a part, dear reader...
LIBRARY OF QUAINT 20TH CENTURY EVERYMEN
EIGHTBALL

Clowes' work can be ordered from Fantagraphics Books at 1.800.657.1100.